

# FOSTERING COLLEGE SUCCESS:

## Supporting Foster Youth in Higher Education



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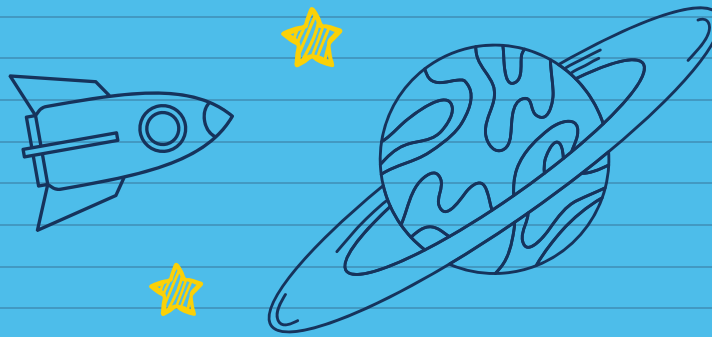
# LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Recognize the role of trauma on foster youths' educational outcomes.
2. Demonstrate how to engage and motivate foster youth students around college and career exploration.
3. Understand and address the major challenges foster youth students face in postsecondary programs.



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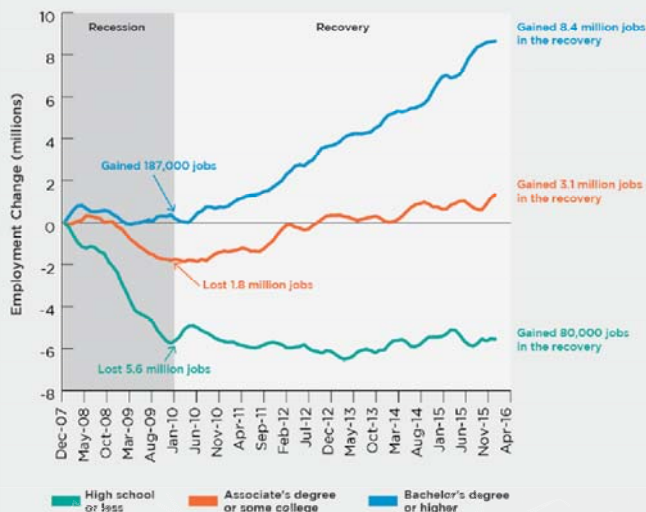
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# BENEFITS OF POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

## EDUCATION PAYS OFF

Figure 1. Workers with a Bachelor's degree have added 8.4 million jobs in the recovery, but workers with high school diplomas or less added only 80,000 jobs after losing 5.6 million jobs in the recession.



**99%**  
of jobs created since  
the Great Recession  
have gone to those  
with at least some  
college.



# EDUCATION PAYS OFF

And in more ways than money!



Improved health outcomes



Increased civic participation (e.g., higher voting and lower incarceration rates)



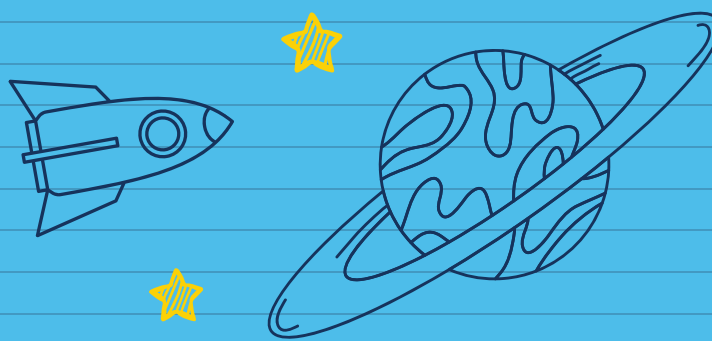
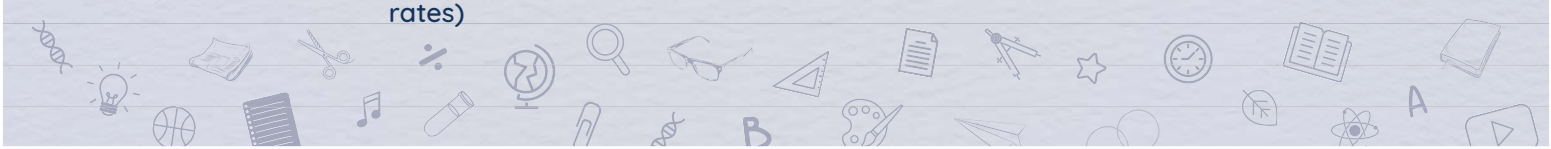
Greater likelihood of one's children attending college



Increased career satisfaction



Decreased risk of certain traumatic experiences and adversities



## WHAT IS FOSTER CARE?

# ENTERING FOSTER CARE

Child abuse report is made



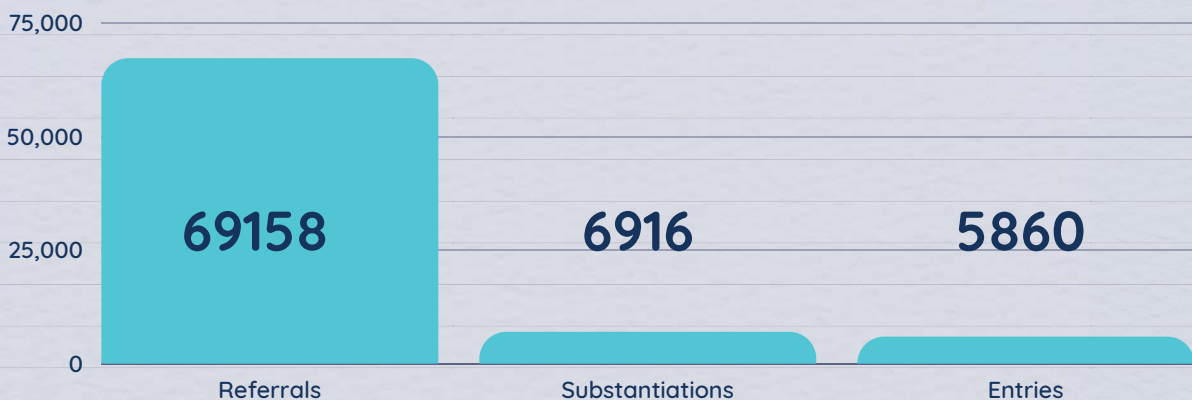
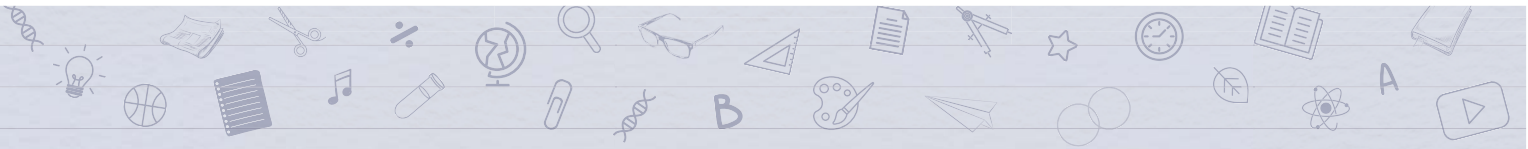
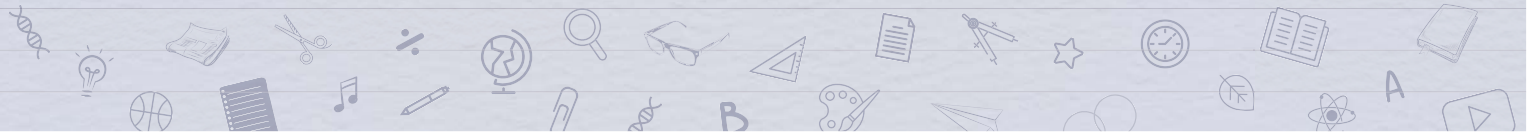
## Investigation

- Allegation unsubstantiated
- In-home services
- Removal from home
  - Placed with relatives
  - Foster family
  - Group living



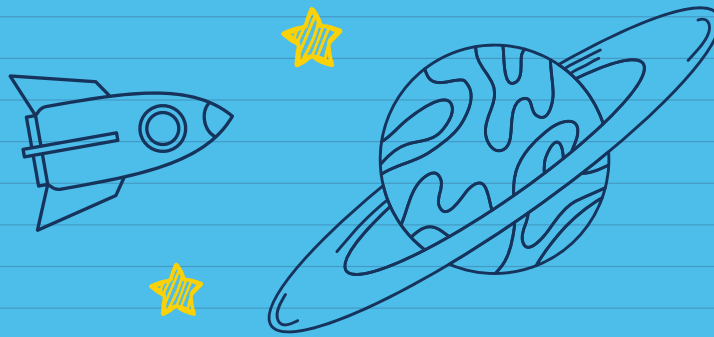
## Dispositions

- Reunification
- Guardianship
- Continued foster care
- Youth can remain in foster care until age 21

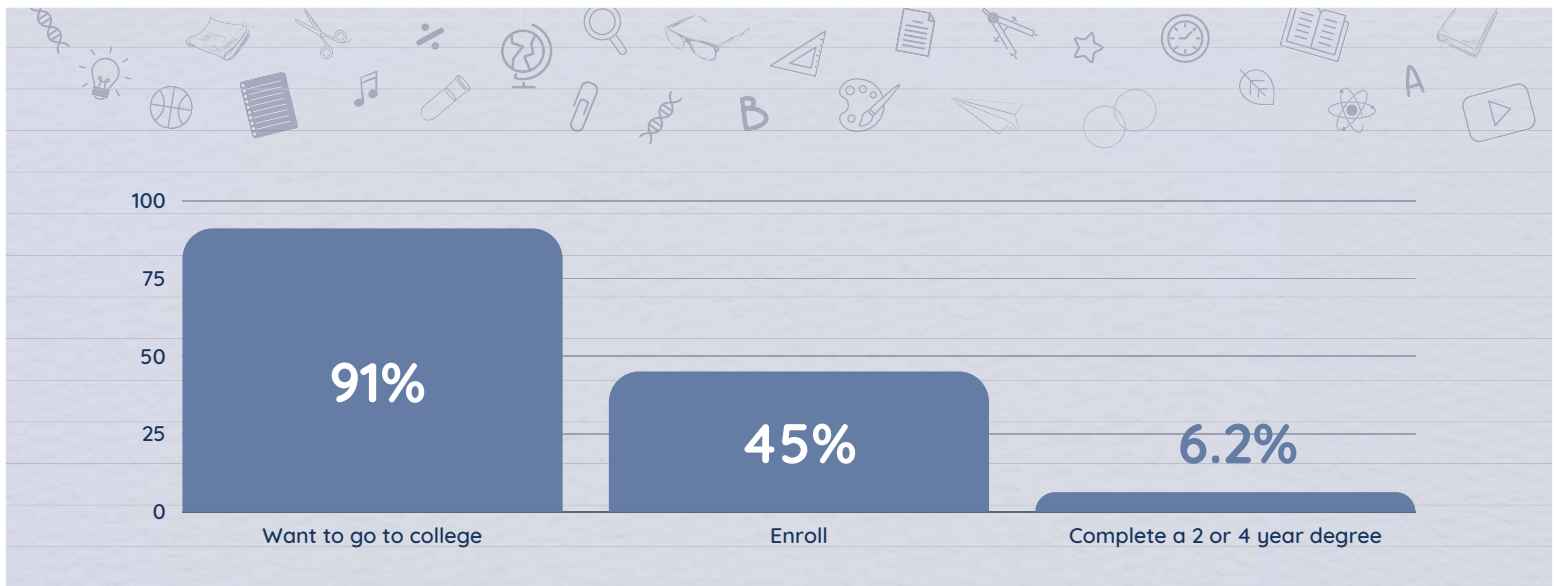


# REFERRALS, SUBSTANTIATIONS, AND ENTRIES

2020 TN data from Kids Count Data Center



# FOSTER YOUTH POSTSECONDARY OUTCOMES



## COLLEGE ASPIRATIONS VS. REALITY

# WHY?

## Factors that impact foster youths' postsecondary success

Only 58 percent of foster youth nationally complete high school by age 18

Underlying/unaddressed trauma and mental health concerns

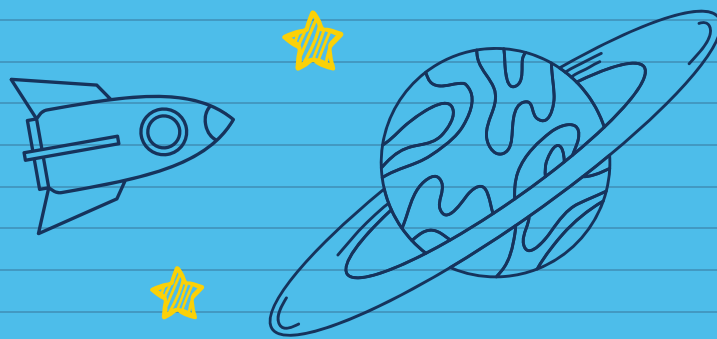
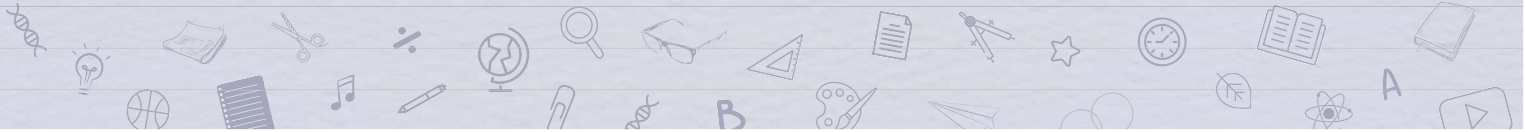
Lack of support and assistance with navigating the matriculation process

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs/competing needs and demands

Parenting responsibilities

Lack of stability

High rates of disability



IMPACT OF TRAUMA ON FOSTER  
YOUTHS' EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

# WHAT IS TRAUMA?

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) defines trauma as:

"an intense, recurring, and/or prolonged event or events that threatens or causes harm to an individual's emotional and/or physical well-being."



# WHAT ROLE DOES TRAUMA PLAY?

1

It is estimated that 90% of youth in foster care have experienced at least one traumatic event.

2

Abuse and/or neglect inflicted by a primary caregiver is known to have a pervasive impact on attachment, identity formation, and the ability to think, learn, and concentrate

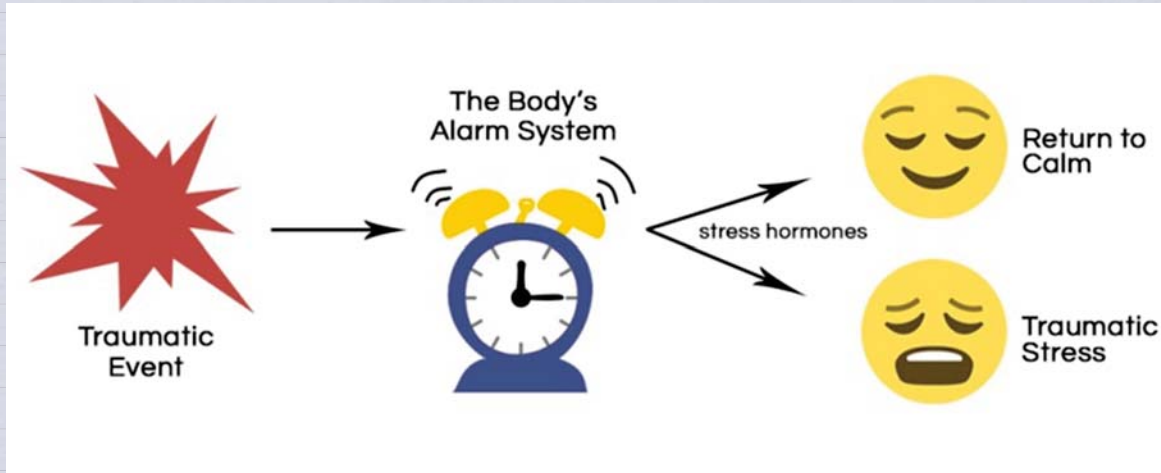
3

Experiencing trauma initiates the stress response cycle aka "fight, flight, or freeze mode." For youth who've had repeat traumatic exposure, this response can be stuck in "on mode"





# THE STRESS RESPONSE CYCLE

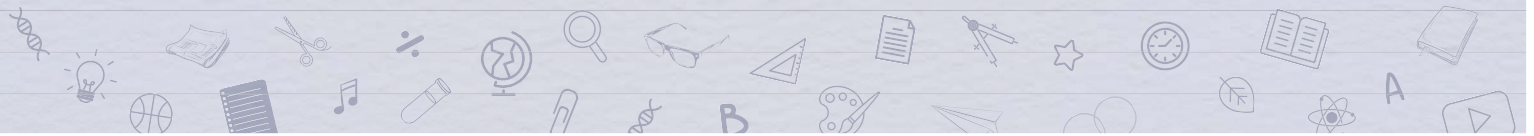


# HOW DO FOSTER YOUTH PERCEIVE DANGER?



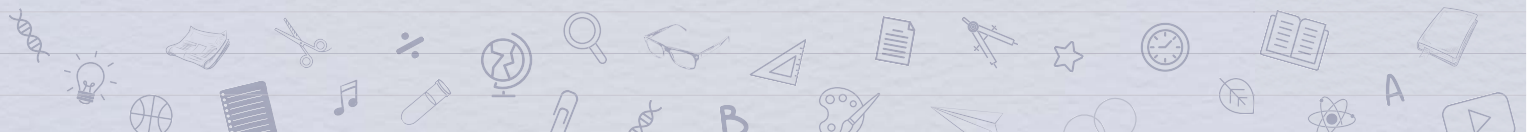
# HOW DO FOSTER YOUTH PERCEIVE DANGER?

- Transitioning to college may be like seeing a stick but thinking it's a snake
- Youth who are having a trauma response to the transition may be:
  - Avoidant or unresponsive when you reach out to them regarding deadlines or tasks
  - Having difficulty staying organized or concentrating
  - Withdrawn
  - Argumentative or oppositional
  - Experiencing increased anxiety and/or depression



Bernice's story

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SRgkldU2og>



## HOW DOES TRAUMA IMPACT LEARNING?

Hypervigilance

Poor self-regulation

Negative thinking

Difficulty forming trusting relationships

Challenges with planning & self-control/monitoring

Reactive and/or avoidant behaviors



## WHAT ARE SOME REASONS WHY A FOSTER YOUTH MIGHT SAY:

- "I don't want to go to college"
- or
- "College isn't for me"



# THE INVISIBLE BACKPACK

I always fail. Something is  
wrong with me.

I'm not good enough.

I'm scared.

College isn't for  
people like me.

I'm stupid.

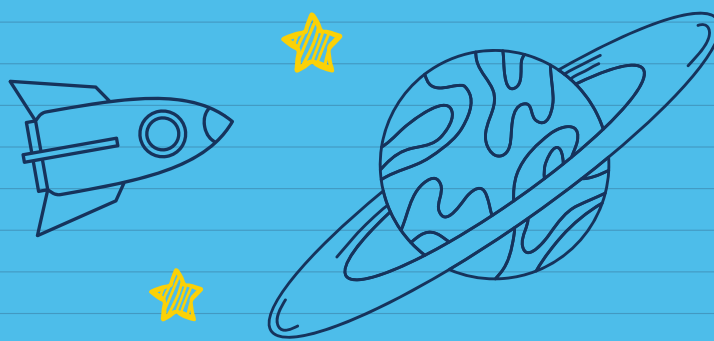


I'm not rich enough.

I can't trust anyone.

No one expects me to  
do well.

I am alone.



HOW CAN YOU MAKE A  
DIFFERENCE?

# FLIP THE SCRIPT!

You are capable!

It's okay to fail  
and try again.

You are enough.

It's okay to be scared.

College is for you.



There are a lot of resources and  
supports to help you succeed.

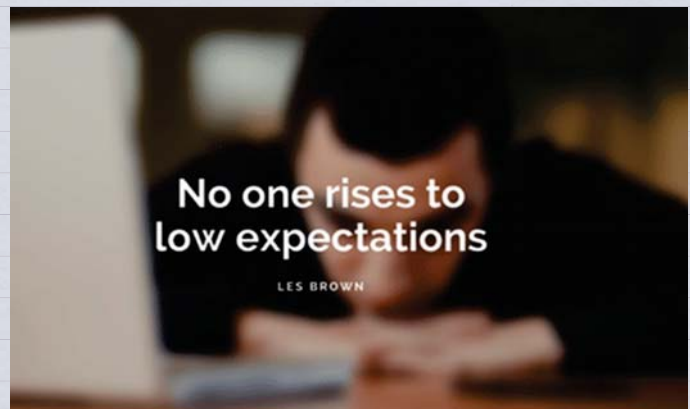
I believe in you.

You can do this.

I support you.

# SET HIGH EXPECTATIONS

- Danger of the self-fulfilling prophecy
- Set high expectations – regardless of past academic performance
- Consistently express expectation that the student will graduate from college and go on to a successful career
- Use such phrases as, “When you graduate....”



# BUILD RAPPORT

P

Playfulness

A

Acceptance

C

Curiosity

E

Empathy



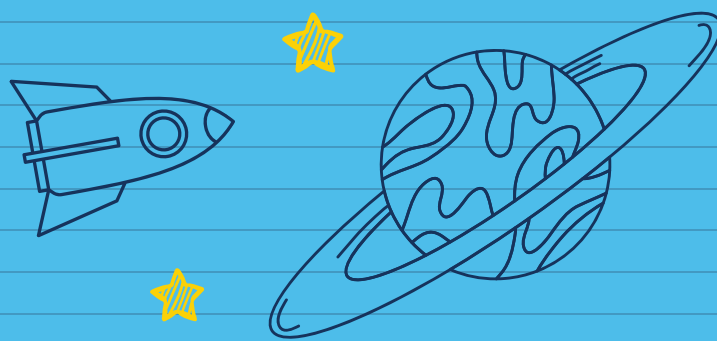
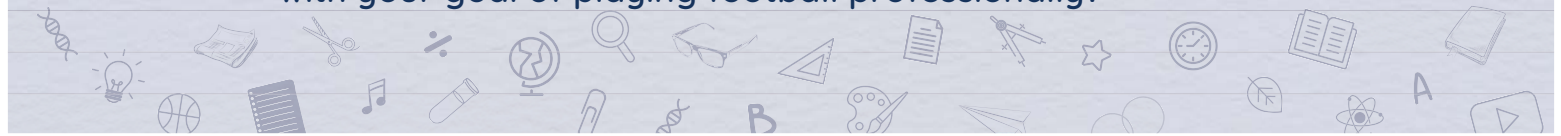
# ENCOURAGE EXPLORATION

- Make sure students know their "why"
- It can be challenging for students to persist through general education courses if they don't feel a connection to how they support their identified goals
- Encourage informational shadowing, internship opportunities, and employment opportunities in career paths of interest



# ACTIVITY: MOVING BEYOND "NO"

- Roleplay an interaction between a foster youth student and an education liaison or ILP caseworker as they discuss the student's college and career aspirations
- Avoid using the word "no" or other discouraging phrases (e.g., "that's unrealistic")
- Practice using "and" as well as **open-ended questions** to build upon their goals
  - Ex. "I don't need to focus on a career plan after college because I plan on going pro."
  - "How do you think performing better academically could help you with your goal of playing football professionally?"



## POST-MATRICULATION PITFALLS



# FOSTER YOUTHS' CONCERNS

## Post-matriculation

- Who will show up for me on graduation day?
- What if I'm feeling overwhelmed?
- What happens next?
- How will I manage work/school/family?

# THE MAJOR PITFALLS

## And how to avoid them!

### Pitfall

- Summer melt

### Strategy

- Work with the student over the summer to gain familiarity with the campus
- Ensure they have everything they need by the start of school, including tutoring, DSS, housing and food
- Call the night before, call the day of, check how the first day went, first day of college DONE!

# THE MAJOR PITFALLS

And how to avoid them!

## Pitfall

- Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) standards that result in financial aid disqualification

## Strategy

- Require mid-term grades be submitted
- Employ "intrusive coaching" strategies
- Coordinate with financial aid to ensure "one-stop shopping"

# THE MAJOR PITFALLS

And how to avoid them!

## Pitfall

- Underlying or exacerbated mental health concerns

## Strategy

- Monitor warning signs
- Prioritize access to mental health services and support
- Identify a point person in each department (financial aid, admissions, DSS) for foster youth students to prevent re-traumatization

# WARNING SIGNS

- Changes in academic performance
- Inability to cope with daily problems/activities
- Drug/alcohol use
- Weight changes
- Excessive worrying and anxiety
- Withdrawn
- Loss of interest
- Persistent anger



# THE STUDENT PRESSURE COOKER

COMPETING OR CONFLICTING  
DEMANDS

MOUNTING REQUIREMENTS

ARBITRARY DEADLINES

NO ROOM TO FAIL

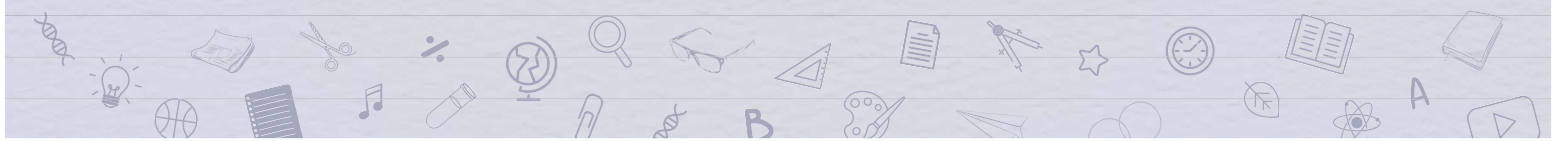
TOO MANY ENFORCERS,  
NOT ENOUGH SUPPORTERS

NO VOICE OR CHOICE



# BE TRAUMA-INFORMED

- The most important asset a student will have is their relationship with YOU
- Connect before you correct
  - Communicate and demonstrate to foster youth that you care about their success
- Offer direct and tangible support
- Be sensitive to family structures
- Respect students' privacy
- Give second, third, and fourth chances
  - Allow for the time it takes to create relationships
  - Be cognizant of how trauma may be influencing behavior
  - Provide students with a safe space to fail and learn from that failure



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# QUESTIONS? COMMENTS? THOUGHTS?

Ask away!



# THANK YOU!

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